Center for Modern Greek Studies
Greek American Oral History Project
Transcription

Tape:

Subject: Leonidas Kyriakopoulos
Interviewer: Patricia Yost
Date of Interview: 6/2/2002

Transcriber: Amanda Cookson
Date of Transcription: 7/12/2010

I: Interviewer
L: Leonidas

Counter: 000

I: //Patricia Yost with Leonidas Kyriakopoulos on June 2nd, 2002. I'd like to begin the interview with uhh your name and where you were from in Greece, where you were born.

L: Uhh my name is Leonidas Dimitrios Kyriakopoulos. I was born the 9th of April, 1948 in the village of Hora, Trifilias in Greece. I'm one of three children, the youngest one of three children to Dimitri Kyriakopolous and Eleni Agnastasochorou {006}. Uhh they were married in 1944, we came to America in 1951 and//

I: And do you remember the name of the ship?

L: On the Νέα Ελλάς,

I: Νέα Ελλάς.

L: Νέα Ελλάς from Pireaus but it's, it's an interesting story how we, how we came to come to America which was//

I: //through celebrity.

L: Yeah, my mother for years, well let me step back a little bit. My mother was a midwife in Greece and she was an educated woman, she graduated from the school in Athens in 1934. It wasn't at the, you know for years I thought it was a university but it was not in fact a university it was some kind of trade school that trained women to be nurses and midwives. And when upon graduation my grandmother, her mother Stavroula

Koroneas {014}, had mortgaged all the property and houses to pay for my mother's education and actually went with my mother from {015} which was across the bay from Kalamata to Athens and stayed with her while she finished her education and I believe it was two years. And right after her graduation it was a very short time later that the mortgage was due otherwise we would, she would have lost her house.

I: Ohh.

L: So anyway, my mother upon her graduation searched around for a place to conduct a practice and she was a very practical woman so she looked around and tried to find a place where there weren't, didn't have any midwives or very few midwives. And she, the first place that she went, the first village and I don't know it's name but she told me this story and it was a very uhh heart-wrenching kind of story because the first child that she delivered and I don't recall the name of the village but the first child that she delivered was a little girl. And when she delivered the child she, you know, she wrapped up the child in a swaddling cloth and presented it to the father and the father was so upset that he didn't have a son that he walked through the door and threw the child out into the street. And my mother was so freaked out, you know, she went out and retrieved the child, brought the child in, gave it to the mother, scolded the father, you know. This is 1930's in Greece and was determined from that moment to find some other place. She just couldn't be around these people that had such little regard//

I: //Mmm.

L: She was a, she was, she was heroic because she valued education and at that time in Greece nobody valued their daughters and no one valued education except my mother and my grandmother. My grandfather, Leonidas who I was named for, Leonidas Anastosopoulos, had died in the 30's. I think 1937, I believe. Or maybe, yeah, anyway before I was born I, I, I don't recall the circumstances but when I returned in 1990 I found that he uhh, along with being a farmer I think that many of these, you know, village people had many different things to do, he was a Saddlemaker, he was a Veterinarian and he was a farmer.

I: Mmm.

L: He did these various things and he had only two children, no three children. My mother, Helen, a son, John, and my mother's sister and her name I believe is umm you know I don't recall what her name is right now but I'll, I'll think of it sometime. But at, at, at any rate after her first experience with delivering children my mother looked around and she found a village in uhh Messenia which was Hora Trifilias that didn't have a midwife. So she went to Hora Trifilias and uhh set up a, a practice and during that time she met my father. My father, Dimitri Kyriakopoulos, was from a nearby village which was across the ravine called uhh Abilofto {042}. And the Kyriakople and Abilofto were a very big clan and they, you know, they I don't know how many of them there were at that time but apparently there were about 1,500 people in the village at that time. Uhh but my father had begun very early and he was the village butcher and he had a little stall

off the village square, my mother set up her practice on the other side of the square. So at some point they met and my, my mother looked around and she saw that my father was a good-looking guy and he was a hard worker, he was kinda smart and she said, "Hmm, I kinda like that guy." <chuckling>

I: <laughing>

L: So, so she, so they met and they had some kind of courtship I'm not sure how long the courtship lasted or what year, all I know is that they were married in 1944 and that my father had been engaged to another girl in the village, Victoria {050} for 17 years.

I: Wow <laughing>

L: So he was engaged to somebody else for 17 years, Helen comes into town, looks around, looks at Dimitri, seems to be hardworking, good-looking guy, she said, "Well, let me see what I can do about that." But there were difficulties from the beginning because uhh my mother's family had spent all their money on my mother's education so she didn't have a dowry so that was a big impediment.

I: But she had an education.

L: She had an education, right, right. And umm there's one story that she told me that I find very revealing is the day in 1944 that she was to get married to my father, Dimitri, and my uncles, my uncle Foti and my uncle {057} and my grandfather, George, were all opposed to//

I: //These are his brothers and father//

L: //his brother and father, George's father, Fotis, and uhh, uhh {058} are his brothers, my father was the middle brother. They were opposed to the marriage to my mother because she didn't have a dowry so my mother planned her wedding in secret, they had agreed to get married. She planned her wedding in secret, she was inside her house baking uhh, baking cookies for her wedding feast. Baking {061} and you know, all these pastries and Fotis had heard something. You know, Fotis was a great womanizer, gambler, kind of a no good during, from what I understand from my father is uhh, my father was the hardest working one and Fotis was the playboy. He just played all the time and everyone brought their money and threw them a family {065} it was distributed by my grandfather. So when my grand//

I: //Fotis was the older?//

L: //Old, older//

I: //Oldest//

L: //Oldest brother.

I: Mmhmm.

L: So my father's older brother, {066} is his younger brother. But anyhow it caught wind of something, you know, in some card game somewhere, and they uhh referred to it – eh, eh Eleni was always known as Eleni Mani {068}, they didn't know mani {068} being midwife so.

I: Mmhmm.

L: Which she was also considered a doctor because she could, she could uhh prescribe, I don't know if she could prescribe drugs but she had access to antibiotics from the British, you know, from the British military. But anyhow, so Fotis goes over and confronts my mother, he knocks on her door, she's in her apron, she's covered with flour because she's baking and uhh he was a very dapper sort of guy and he used to fold his jacket on hot afternoons and put it over his should in the European fashion.

I: Oy.

L: He knocked on her threshold and she answered the door and uhh he said, "Come on out here, you! You know, I'm not gonna step into your house but you come out here cuz I wanna talk to you. I understand that you're gonna marry my brother, Dimitri." And she said, "What?" She said, "You've got a lot of nerve coming over here." She said, "Listen, I'm an educated woman. I'm a doctor. What kind of, you know, who do you think you are talking to me like that. I wouldn't marry your brother if he was the last guy around here. Give me – get out of here!" You know, so anywhile Fotis was satisfied that uhh, that she was telling the truth. In the meantime she had gone to the checkpoint, this was 1944, the war was still going on. And the soldiers are where these checkpoints outside the villages and, and she went to them and she said, "Look, don't let anybody cross over this checkpoint from {080} to Hora tonight except Dimitri Kyriakopoulos.

I: Ohh!

L: So and because of her status in the village, because she was a doctor, and because she tended their wounds when they were injured, they uhh said, "Ok." So Dimitri came over, Dimitri and Helen were married and the rest of the family didn't find out til the next day. By that time it was too late and that was kind of the beginning of a, I mean they never approved of my mother anyway because she didn't have a dowry. But that was kind of the beginning of a feud in the family that lasted for 30 years or more. So.

I: Let's uhh discuss coming to America uhh. What did you father do?

L: Well my father was a local uhh, he was a village butcher. He had started in the trade by helping his next door neighbor when he was 12 years old. So by the time he was, you know, a teenager or in his early 20s, well when he was ear-, in his early 20s was

the time of the first war with Turkey so he went off to war and came back and when he went off to war he was apparently successful but because he went to his youngest sister uhh, and her name was uhh, At-, what is her name? Atvasil {093}, Julia's sister, she wasn't married at the time and he gave her all his money which at that time were silver drachma and it was apparently quite a lot, several thousand, I'm not sure. But he went off to war and by the time he got back they didn't expect him to survive but it, I think he was gone for two years and when he returned he said that uhh they had enough money to buy one chicken because the inflation had been so great.

I: Ohh.

L: So before the war it was enough money for a dowry. When he returns he has enough money to buy one chicken. So anyhow so Vasil was the youngest, the youngest sister and it was the duty of the brothers to basically provide a dowry for their sisters so they wouldn't be burdened with her maintenance, you know, they want to marry her off to somebody, anybody. But uhh so my father was uhh, he was a village butcher and he would get up in the morning and he'd go out, he knew all the farmers in the area and he would go out and he would select, you know, various lambs, sheeps, goats, whatever to slaughter. And he would do this a couple of times a week because there was no refrigeration, you know. So you have to, you know you get up early in the morning and would slaughter the animals, you would sell them during the course of the day and then, you know, it was on and on and on. And that's how when I have a tape of him sitting in the courtyard of his ancestral home, the home built by my grandfather, George, telling the story of his life, telling that whole story. I made those tapes in 1990. So anyhow my father, Dimitri, and Eleni are now in, in Hora. They've just recently been married and the feud in the family made it pretty much impossible for her to stay there. They wouldn't even allow my father to visit my grandfather on his deathbed. They wouldn't let him come in so it was pretty severe ostracism.

I: Hmm.

L: So at that time they were married in 1944, World War II was still going on. There was an American, his name uhh, we always called him Barbagianni. His name was John, I believe his name is Petropoulos, he had left the village Avilofto {114}, the village Avilofto and came to America in 1902.

I: Wow.

L: And he happened to be visiting Greece during, before he came to Greece, before World War II and then was stranded there at the outbreak of World War II, 1939. So he happ-, he was in the village and at some point previously, maybe in 1945 as best I can, you know, he wasn't able to go back to America but he'd gotten pneumonia. So it must've been towards the end of World War II because my mother was able to get antibiotics from the British and I'm not sure when they developed penicillin but it must've been in the middle 40's.

I: I don't know.

L: Yeah. But anyhow when he'd gotten pneumonia and they called upon, they said, "Go get the doctor," and when, when they said doctor what they meant was the midwife.

I: <laughing>

L: So, so they get, they bring my mother to his, to his bedside and she uhh says uhh, uhh, "Barbagianni, you have a choice to make to here. You know, I want to take my family to America and you have pneumonia. I have antibiotics. We could do two things here: we can make a bargain will you sponsor me and my family to come to America and be treated and you can survive this thing that you have or I can leave and you can die. So you choose. So he made the choice to be treated and he honored his word and I have found documents. The earliest document that I have was dated in 1947 which was during the Greek Civil War which is an application of support document, it's not the actually an application cuz an application to, for a visa for members of you to bring relatives. Now I don't believe that we were actually related but he stated that we were, that he was uhh, our uncle.

I: Mmhmm.

L: Basically. So, you know, so then we manipulated the papers so that he could become our sponsor. So I haven't discovered {133} David's support and so on. So as early as 1947 my mother had begun the paperwork for all of this. We didn't immigrate until 1951 and I have the steamship ticket and I believe it's on May 15th or May 19th that was actually departed {135}. But so the first thing to do was to find a sponsor, the second thing to do was to raise the money for the, the steamship fare. And my mother tells me a story about the steamship fare. By this time she was, she had, she was pretty well established in Hora as the midwife and they're in a neighboring town, Gargargianos {141} is the name of the town, it's about 12 kilometers away or 20 kilometers, I'm not sure. But it's, it's, I've, I've visited the place umm, you know, while I was there in Greece. There was an old banker who had a young wife who uhh was her first pregnancy and she had a breach baby.

I: Mmm.

L: And the other doctors in town had given up so out of desperation what he s-, he said, "Send for Eleni Mani to Hora." So he sent his carriage and he got my mother and my mother comes into the room as she tells this story and she goes up to the banker and she says uhh, "Kyrios Stavro," I think his name was Stavro, she said, "I'm here now, you don't have to worry about a thing, everything is gonna be fine." And furthermore, I guarantee that you're gonna have a son. Pretty audacious of my mother.

I: I'll say <chuckling>

L: She said that she went into the room, you know, she, here she is in the house, she's just made this incredible guarantee that he's going to have an, an, and he said to her, she said, "Look, if you have a choice, you know, uhh, if the circumstances, you know, if, if you have a choice between saving the child or saving my wife, save my wife." Which is unusual//

I: //for that time//

L: //you know, for, for someone to save them for that time, you know, because he would want the child anyhow. My mother said that she uhh, she went into the door, closed the door her, went into the room where the, the, you know, the, the young woman was, the mother was and she closed the door behind her and she fell down on her knees and prayed. She was a religious woman her entire life, you know, so. Anyway, she went to the, she was able to turn the child apparently and delivered the child. And the child was a boy so she wrapped him up//

I: //<laughing>

L: And she took the child and presented him to the father and said, "Here's your son." And he was so ecstatic, he was apparently in his 50's, you know, he's an older man that he went and removed a stone from the wall and took out a lot of money and it was apparently enough for the ticket//

I: //Wow, that's//

L: //to come, to come to America. And//

I: //Gratitude//

L: //the way, yeah, the way she//

I: //<laughing>//

L: //said it uhh ok then she goes home and uhh, she goes back to Hora and my father's laying in bed uhh on his back and he has, my brother and sister in one arm and me on the other and she pops in and she throws the money up in the air and it all//

I: //Oh! <laughing>//

L: //comes fluttering down. Now I'm not sure what, what year this is but she said, "Ok, Dimitri, we're going to America. Here's the money for the ticket." And my father in disbelief says, "Helen, you know, you're on about this America stuff all the time, America, America, America, I can't take it anymore. I'm gonna go play cards at the καφενείο."

I: <laughing>

L: So when he goes down to the kafeneio my mother goes out on her balcony and her house at that time. Uhh overlooked the village square and umm, it was a rental house because the house we had before which we owned the Germans burned down when the occupied the village. So anyhow she went out on the balcony and she called out to all the women, she knew them all because she delivered all their children. And by the time my father got back from playing cards at the cafeneio she had given everything away in the house except our suitcases. And Dimitri comes in, he looks around, there's nothin' there. And she says, "We've got our visa, we've got our sponsor, we're going to America. Get your ass up to Athens, get our passports, you know//

I: //Ehh <laughing>

L: we're gonna, we're gonna go." So that's the story as it has come down to me. So then {177} the family//

I: //<interrupting>

L: Yeah, so the family goes up to Athens and I remember, I guess we took some kind of train at that time but I remember when we got to Athens I have a memory of sitting on a, on a, on a bench watching my parents walking up the, the gangplank to the Nea Ellas, the ship with Barbagianni carrying a suitcase, my father carrying two suitcases and my mother with my brother and sister in each hand walking up the gangplank. Before they took their little stroll up there apparently there was a flower garden in Peireas {183} around there. She sits me on a little bench and says, "Don't move from this spot. {184}" I'll be back for you. Now why she put the youngest child there rather than the eldest child I, I don't know but apparently//

I: //<chuckling>

L: I was named for her father and I listened <laughing>//

I: //Maybe that she trusted you//

L: //Yeah, yeah, she trusted me. So immediately as they walked onto the ship I got up and started walking around.

I: Hmm.

L: And became lost almost immediately, you know//

I: //<laughing>//

L: //because the, the boats, you know, disembarking and every one is going around and finally some policeman or some official found me and asked me what I was doing

and I said, "Well I'm Leonidas Kyriakopoulos and I'm going to America and that's our ship over there, the Nea Ellas." So they, they uhh, my mother was frantically looking for me because I've of course moved from where she left me. And uhh, and she found me, we were reunited and then we were on board the Nea Ellas. Now as far as the passage goes I have a few memories, I have a couple memories of the passage. There was a contention of Greek soldiers on there that were dressed in their, their traditional uhh Greek outfits uhh, I think they call them {195}//

I: //Oh, the {196}//

L: //Yeah, they were dressed in their {196} and they had uhh maybe there were 10 or 20 of them but I remember them doing uhh, the marching around on the deck//

I: //Hmm//

L: //during the passage and I remember running through the corridors with my brother and sister.

I: <laughing>

L: Running through the corridors but in later years my father read to me from his diary so we went from Peireas {199} and, and the, the ship stopped at Malta then Gibraltar, then Nova Scotia, and then New York. And he, he has a, a diary which I have somewhere but I'm unable to read it. So but the other memory that I have is when we were coming into New York harbor, uhh my brother being very excited and, and coming down below decks to get me and running up to the front of the ship and him hoisting me up to the rail to show me the Statue of Liberty as we came into New York harbor.

I: Wow.

L: Now part of the family lore is that we've actually, you know, we docked at the harbor and uhh, I believe we came through Ellis Island, this is 1951. We may not have but I did get some kind of illness I think because our, I have a vague memory of being in a hospital bed or something and, and having a Greek priest, you know, come and visit me with holy water and all that sort of thing but, but as far as I know the passage we left on the 15th or the 19th of May, I'll have to check the ticket just to make sure. And we arrived, I think it was a 15 day voyage because of all the stops.

I: Mmhmm.

L: So we arrived somewhere around the 1st of June in uhh, in New York. And then from New York to Chicago, I don't know how many days we were in New York or Chicago but we ended up in Shelby, Montana. And the family lore is that we landed there on the 4th of July.

I: Oh.

L: In Shelby//

I: //And that's where the Barbagianni,

L: //that's where John Barbagianni//

I: //Barbagianni//

L: //had his little business, he had a little restaurant.

I: Mmhmm.

L: With another Greek bachelor, they had this little restaurant on the main, on the main street there. And from there, from Shelby so here we arrive in Shelby on 4th of July or whatever it is in 1951 and Barbagianni had some property in Great Falls, he owned a little house which we rented and later purchased.

I: Ohh.

L: But my father told me years later he, he said to me, he said, "You know why we, we'd al-, we were able to buy a house here because when he realized that uhh we were coming to America and my mother's name, you know, mind was made up, you know, he sold his business and when my sister, Georgia, was born in 1945 he had planted a grove of olives. He had some land and he planted a grove of olives on a very steep hillside as part of her dowry.

I: For your sister?

L: For my sister.

I: Mmhmm.

L: And he sold, he sold the olives, he sold the business and we apparently a stack of money because my father said, "Well we have enough money to purchase this house over time." And this morning I just actually found some of the documents.

I: Uh huh.

L: As how that purchase actually went down. But in Great Falls, my father was able to find a job on the Great Northern Railroad. There were a number of Greeks, there were maybe 20 Greek families in Great Falls. There were enough families to have their own church which was a very//

I: //that's surprising to me//

L: //which is a big deal, yeah, yeah. So Great Falls at that time was the largest uhh city in Montana, largest city in the state. And it had uhh the Great Northern Railroad. It wasn't on the main line but the railroad came through, it made a detour from {235} J. Hill built the Great Northern from Minneapolis to Seattle, it was a northern route, the Northern Pacific was below us and then the Union Pacific and then the Southern Pacific, you know, the Trans-Continental Railroad//

I: //Yeah, yeah.

L: So the last major railroad to go trans-continental in the United States was the Great Northern.

I: So your father never worked as a butcher in the United States?

L: No, no, no, he didn't. There weren't very many Greeks – the Greeks that, that preceded us to Great Falls, many of them uhh worked well, they had different kinds of businesses. They had like shoeshine parlors and hat blocking places {242}. A couple of families, there was always a Greek grocer, you know, who brought Greek cheese and olives and things to service the community. There were two Greek grocers. There were two families, there was uhh, Sam, which I would work, Sam had a shoeshine parlor called "New York Shine" and there was another one up the street called "Liberty Shine" where they shined shoes and blocked hats. And then uhh a number of the Greek families, the men in the families worked on the railroad, the Great Northern Railroad. And I actually just found an employment document this morning that my father got a job on the 6th of July at the Great Northern Railroad as a section, on the section gang, he was a gandy {250}//

I: //The 6th, the 6th of July//

L: //Of July//

I: //of '51?

L: 51.

I: Didn't take him long <laughing>

L: No it didn't take him long I think they had it lined up. It turned out that the foreman for his section gang crew was Greek and his name was uhh Charlie Vellanos {253}. And Charlie Vellanos was a real dapper sort of guy he, he had wavy gray hair, you know, and he kept all his hair and used to drive around in a '52 Buick convertible.

I: Wow <laughing>

L: And he was the, he was the foreman of the gang and there were, there were a number of Greeks on, on, on the section gang and my father got a job right away on the

Great Northern Railroad and he worked there until his retirement, he worked there for something like from 1951 til 1974, '75, something like that. And uhh so his entire career as a workman in American umm was working with the Great Northern Railroad. And Charlie Vellanos and the other Greeks, you know, when you're a Greek in America you, they immediately embrace you. And then they start fighting with you shortly thereafter//

I: //Yeah//

L: //But they immediately embrace you because you're, you know, you're from the same spot of the world. But Charlie Vellanos was kind of my surrogate grandfather and years later, he used to come by every Sunday and he would take us around in convertible but years later he uhh, he, he was responsible for my getting a job on the section gang. When I was 16 I was old enough to work on the railroad uhh, I got a job in the summer working umm on the section gang with my father and I was able to make enough money, maybe I was 18 cuz I was still in high school, and I was able to make enough money. I was working as a busboy, my mother had gotten me a job in a hotel when I was in 7th grade//

I: //Wow//

L: //as a busboy. And we always worked, you know, I, I, I'll go into my work history a little bit but I was able to make enough money during the course of the summer to pay my tuition to Montana State University and during the year it was a quarter system and tuition was $458 a quarter//

I: //Ohh, I remember//

L: //at that time, right. Well I, I found the records but I also I remember that the only reason I actually, you know, the educational experience in America was a little bit strange but Montana, the college systems were land grant colleges and it was written into their, their Constitution that if you graduated from a high school in Montana the state university must take you for at least one quarter. And then if you made the grade that you could continue otherwise they would take you out. So, so when I graduated from high school in 1966 of course the Vietnam War was going on and no one knew what the hell was goin' on so I, I went to the arts school at Montana State University and they had to accept me for one quarter. I was not, I was not a, a, a scholastic superstar because I had begun my work career when – my, my first job in America was a shoeshine boy with my brother. He was six and I was four and we made a little shoeshine box and we lived on 6th Avenue South and 3rd Street and the, which is not far, which is walking distance from the center of town. Which Central Avenue was six blocks away and two blocks over so we would make our little shoeshine box, Nick and I, and we'd walk down and we'd walk through all the foresters, there's lots of forests in Montana//

I: //<laughing>//

L: //and we would try to shine people's shoes, you know, as our first job. We later became newspaper boys and then busboys and then we worked on the railroad as our career.

I: Did your brother go to college?

L: Yeah, my brother went to Montana State, he went to art school as well. And my sister, my sister went to, she's a high risk of {292} she went to University of Chicago, became a nurse. So we are the first generation in our family ever to go to university. Great big deal, you know, when you consider from at//

I: //<interrupting>//

L: //from Classical times til now. So it was, it, it, it was//

I: //But your mother set a precedence.

L: My mother, yeah, without my mother, she always valued education, you know. She would always say to me, you know, "Remember that you're my son." <laughing> "And that I didn't wait for any stupid children you know." <laughing>

I: <laughing>

L: So but that's, so that's how we came to America//

I: //What was elementary school in Montana as a Greek did you have problems at all?//

L: Well it, it, well it was a funny sort of school that I went to. I went to Longfellow Elementary School which, which was a brand new elementary school. It just happened to be built uhh right when I was ready to, I started my schooling, let's see my sister, I started when I was four, that would make my sister, my brother would be seven, my sister would be eight. My parents were both working, my father on the railroad and my mother at whatever job she could get. She was like a nurse's aid at the old folks' home to begin with. She later got a job as a Chambermaid at the Rainbow Hotel where I became a busboy and I worked, I started working as a busboy in the seventh grade and I worked through high school, every, every day through the, until I could get a job in the summers working on the railroad when I went to college. But we always worked, we always did something. Whether it was collecting pop bottles or whatever. And my parents were away most of the time so I was, I was left in the care of my brother and my sister. And so my mother put me in school earlier, she put me in when I was, I was a big kid and I started in kindergarten a year early because I was a big kid. And they, it was total immersion, you know, you just show up, you walk into Mrs. Reilly, the principal's office, she signs you up and she just throws you in class with, with all the other kids.

I: And did you speak English then?

L: No, I didn't start speaking English until I went to kindergarten.

I: Oh.

L: We always spoke Greek at home which continued my, my entire life. My parents never spoke anything but Greek at home and their English was broken English at best.

I: Mmhmm.

L: But they were, you know, but they worked very, very hard and my father especially, I mean, six months after we arrived in 1951 my father had ulcers so badly that he collapsed on the street in Great Falls. And he was taken away to the Deaconess Hospital and I remember Doctor Howard was the surgeon who, who actually up before his surgery I think they took out a section of his stomach, stitched it all back up cuz he had these perforated ulcers.

I: Mmm.

L: But he was so freaked out and so nervous by the change that uhh he just collapsed on the street and while he was in the hospital I remember Charlie Vellanos, the foreman, came to him. And he was in there for a number of day and every two weeks I believe they were paid from the railroad and he showed up one day and umm my father told me this story, he said, " Uhh Dimitri, how are you feeling? I see you're going home tomorrow." He says, "Oh I'm, I'm doing well." Charlie says, "Listen you gotta go down to the pay office and pick up your pay envelope." And my father said, "But I didn't work." And Charlie said, "Yes, you did."

I: <laughing>

L: My father said, "No, no, no I've been here, I didn't work." And my father says, "Dimitri, you're not listening. Yes you did. I signed you in and you worked so you get your butt up out of this hospital bed and you get down there. You have a family, pick up your check, <laughing> pick up your pay envelope because it was all cash in a little envelope.

I: Ohh, ohh.

L: You know, you have a, a pay envelope because the checks weren't, weren't given. So Char-, that's how Charlie Vellanos saved us in 1951 and how he, he, you know, all, my entire life I remember Charlie and his wife uhh. And my father did odd jobs for them. My father, not only did he work on the railroad but during the weekends he did little construction jobs, he finished cement, he did all kinds of things to earn money because we were really on the edge. I mean we grew up in poverty, you know. But it wasn't terribly unusual in Montana at that time at this, you know. Everyone, everyone was, was poor. Well at least in our neighborhood the lower south side//

I: //Mmhmm//

L: //but Longfellow School was unusual because it was a brand new school and I, I remember when I showed up in class you know you're, I didn't really become aware of this until maybe the second grade, the first, second grade because when you, it's, school was such a new thing, you know? You go to school and there are all these toys. We didn't have any toys and there are all these kids, you know. So you immediately start playing with them and you have all these toys. But it's not until a couple years later that you become aware of the clothes that you're wearing aren't like some of the clothes that the other kids were wearing and I found out later. I think by the time I was in second grade that this bus would arrive every day and there would be these kids with these real, the girls would have these nice fluffy dresses and little, you know, {359} under shoes with little straps on 'em, I don't know what they call those shoes, I think they call 'em Mary Janes//

I: //Mary Janes, yeah//

L: //Yeah they would have Mary Janes and it turns out that they would bus over the kids from the country club section of town, Fox Farm Road. So there were these wealthy kids that would come over and then there would be all us ragamuffin, south side kids.

I: Was it a diverse, uhh, neighborhood that you lived in?//

L: //It's uhh, we were the only Greeks in that particular neighborhood but there were a lot of uhh Native American kids. There were Indian kids who used to beat us up every day, every day going to school until I was probably, you know, fourth or fifth grade. We, you know, we would run the gauntlet, you know. How do I, how are we gonna get to school today, you know? We went from 3rd Street to 11th Street where Longfellow was and we walked to school and the Indian kids lived on 5th, 7th, and 8th, and 9th Avenue so we would go up the alleys or we would go downtown and we'd go up but pretty much we could count on being beat up just about every day.

I: What about other nationalities {372} friends?

L: There was one of my friends in grade school was uhh Polk {373} he was a little Polish kid. His mother used to walk him to school every day and she wore a long dress and a babushka and a big apron. There were a couple of other Greek kids uhh, there was Paul Grievas and his brother Bill {375}, his brother, what's Paul's brother's name, he had a sister, Billy, and Paul was older and George. Paul, George, and then there was Tom and Bob {379}. There were maybe of the Greek kids in our part of town on the south side maybe there were two families but there were like 20 families in church. So I remember by the time I was in 4th or 5th grade we would finish regular school and then we'd have to go to the church to start Greek school. And I never really paid attention in Greek school so I was always being punished. If you didn't know your lessons you'd have to hold your hands up//

I: //Ohh//

L: //and the priest would hit you with a ruler, you know, if you didn't know your alpha, bita, or whatever it was. And I would kinda, kinda straggle in and, and, you know, I'd take my beating every day because I wasn't paying attention, you know. But, that's, that's pretty much it. We were kind the rebel Greek kids, you know? We didn't tow the line//

I: //uh huh//

L: //like the other Greek kids did, my brother and I, my sister.

I: I'd like to ask about uhh both you and your brother having been artists, how was that among the Greek community and among your//

L: //It was very//

I: //among your parents//

L: //it was something that nobody understood, you know. I'm, I remem-, I remember a lot uhh. As we were growing up we, I mean, {394} our father put a big fence around the property. The first thing that happens, we show up on the block and we're in, wearing sandles and we have short pants//

I: //Hmm//

L: //like everyone else does. And, and uhh we're speaking this language that nobody else speaks. So immediately we were the kids on the corner, the Greek kids on the corner and, and, and we, we would, there were those who kind of accepted us as kids but there were, that we were victimized by another group of kids because we were a little bit, you know, because we weren't normal kids at all. And we lived in this, you know, behind this fence and, and uhh we wore short pants and we spoke Greek so we were, so we spent a lot of time when I was a little kid kinda allying ourselves with the stronger, I mean the kid across the street, Richard Wellins and those guys they took pity on us. So they kind of helped us out if, if Marvin Smith and Glen {407} and the guys down the street were beating us up they would come to our aid. But we spent a lot of time as kids, at least I did, making weapons, you know rock and sticks <interviewer laughing> and bows and arrows because we knew that if we had to walk, there was a Greek lady who lived next door and at that time there were neighborhood grocery stores so Elsie would call up, she was married to Charlie, he was Greek, and she'd give me a dime to go to the store to get some milk for her or something. There were two neighborhood grocery stores, it was before supermarkets so this was the early 50's. So one of the ways of making a nickel or a dime is you'd, you know, you'd run to the store but you knew when you ran to the store that you had to run through the gauntlet of these kids//

I: //<laughing>//

L: //uhh that would, wouldn't hesitate to, you know, beat you up. So uhh it was, you know, it was touch and go for years.

I: You would design//

L: //Well we'd design alternate routes, you know, we would send out diversions and make weapons//

I: //like weapons//

L: //Yeah, I'd make weapons like they were putting in a sewer system so I started working with clay and we didn't have toys, you know. So we would get sticks and we would carve sticks and we would make things and, and, and of course at school you'd get color crayons and pencils and paper.

I: Uh huh.

L: So that we began to draw and uhh, so I, I was always interested in working with my hands. I remember making things out of clay because they were digging in the street and in Montana you have this gumbo which is a very dense clay. So if you put it with water and you beat it around it becomes workable and you can make shapes with it and you can make things with it. I always like to play in the dirt, in the yard. My mother was just at her wit's end because <interviewer laughing> my clothes were always dirty.

I: <laughing>

L: So she would make up these stories about little, what happens to little boys if they play in the yard and the dirt that the devil comes up behind them and, she was trying to frighten me not to play in the dirt all the time.

I: <laughing>

L: Wouldn't stop me! I would start digging holes, looking over my shoulder, waiting for the devil to come up and take me down <interviewer laughing> because I'm not listening to my mother and I'm playing in the dirt and I'm getting clothes dirty, you know. We didn't have a wash machine at the time//

I: //Ohh//

L: //I was just a torment for her but uhh. I guess I became interested in art through uhh, through, you know, going to school. And my third grade teacher, Mrs. Baker, recognized that I had some talent//

I: //Hmm//

L: //and encouraged me. It was always the women teachers in the Great Falls Public School System, my third grade teacher, Mrs. Baker, my seventh grade teacher, I believe her name was Mrs. Goodwin. And they always encouraged me. So I was always interested in drawing and making things and, and umm so. That's how I became interested. So I think I'm the first one in our generation, you know?

I: To//

L: //To study art, to actually study art, to be interested in it because my mother always wanted me to be a lawyer or doctor, you know, education, education, γράμματα, γράμματα. You've gotta, you've gotta do this but at the same time we were such a poor family we were always working.

I: Uh huh.

L: So when I went to high school, for example, they were putting in a minuteman missile system in Great Falls and the, and the school population doubled in one summer. So we went to high school in shifts, I would go from 6AM to 12.

I: Ohh.

L: So we went in shifts and then I would work from one after-, you know, from til 11 at night. So I never really paid attention and I never really knew what high school was all about. I, I never went to a sports event. I never went to a dance, I never cuz I was always working. And I never, I didn't have parents who understood the process, you know, the educational process. I mean I would continually get thrown out of school and my mother would have to come with me and she'd be speaking to me in Greek, you know, when we went in to see the vice principal, Mr. Johnson, because I got thrown out of school because I was wearing sandals and I wasn't tucking my shirt tail in. They had dress codes, you know.

I: <laughing>

L: The biggest problem when I was a kid was that the girls passing notes in class and people chewing gum and dress codes. <interviewer laughing> You know? So the early 60's so I'd get thrown out of school, my mother would say to me in Greek, "Ok, watch your mom, I'm gonna teach you something." And she would step across the threshold into his office and she would just break down in tears and say, "He's a good boy, you know, he works hard, he does all this stuff. I can't see why he's such a problem." In her broken English, they'd try to soothe her and they'd let me back in the school then.

I: <chuckling>

L: I was not what you would consider a stellar student but.

END OF SIDE A {474}

SIDE B: *000*

I: Could you describe a little more about the assimilation of your family with the American lifestyle for you//

L: //Uhh//

I: //as a, as a Greek//

L: //Sure, sure//

I: //child.

L: Yeah, growing up uhh Greek in Montana is a, is a little bit odd because it's, it's like way out of the mainstream cuz the, the major Greek communities in this country I believe were like Worcester, Massachusetts and Chicago, Illinois and other places like that. But uhh, I re-, you know, I remember that when we came, you know, we came to, to Great Falls, we had our little house on the corner, you know. The first ten or fifteen years, you know, we, we were there. It was tremendous economic struggle for my parents and uhh but the other thing that I think really saved my parents, not so much, you know, my brother and sister and I. My brother and sister were older so they had, you know, they have, I'm sure if they tell you their stories they'll be different than mine but as, as the youngest child uhh I was able I think to, to assimilate much, much easier especially with my peer group, you know, when I went to kindergarten and started that whole thing. They threw me in there. But the complete immersion but the other big thing in the lives of all the Greeks in Montana was the church because the social life of all the Greeks was really centered around the church. So and my mother considered hers-, who was a very religious woman but she was also into ritual and drama, you know. I mean the first pew on the woman's side my mother was always there in the first pew. And when we were old enough I think I became an altar boy when I was six years old. And I remember being in the altar carrying my candle and my mother being out there watching me and I would always make a particular effort to kind of upset her and, you know, like if I was supposed to hold my candle straight I would hold it at an angle.

I: <laughing>

L: My little uniform I would make sure that there was a twist in my ribbon that went over my shoulder or I would make sure that one of my socks was rolled up or rolled down. It's my little way of rebelling because she forced me into this, you know. I mean, Sundays like we, you know, I was an altar boy, I was her son, she was in the front row, I was supposed to do everything perfectly and I, I remember throughout my childhood that uhh Feast Days, you know, our Name Days are a big deal and Feast Days are a big deal. But there are lots of times when you're fasting. You know, you're going to school at umm, at uhh Longfellow Primary School, right? And uhh the, you're supposed to be

fasting cuz it's Greek Easter, right? You're not supposed to eat any meat, you're not supposed to eat any dairy products and here you are at school lunches and they have pigs in a blanket and you're drinking your milk and all that and your, and your mother warned you in the morning that you're not supposed to do this, you're not supposed to do that. And of course, you do. And what you learned in school, you know, you spend far more time with, with American kids and your teachers than you spend with your parents because they're always working. So weekends, Saturday was a day when we all had our chores. My particular chore was to get a little bucket of water, get down on my knees and wash all the baseboards of the house, that was my job. And I was expected to do it. And then Sunday was like church day, you know? So that we would get up and uhh and my mother always woke us up early and uhh, you know, we'd get in our school clothes, we'd go to the church, we'd get there before everyone, you know, go into the altar and help the priest prepare all the stuff and carry the candles or the incense burner, you know, through the whole ritual thing. And I did that from when I was old enough, you know. My mother, you know, if everyone went into the altar when they were six, she would, she would get us in when we were five.

I: <laughing>

L: You know, and, and cuz//

I: //once step ahead//

L: //because, you know, she was always one step ahead and she was always the last authority on if the service is conducted correctly, if at and when whenever there was a, a kid that needed to be baptized or something my mother would put us forward, you know. So we would be godparents to this kid or that kid and she baptized herself because she was a midwife, she baptized hundreds of kids, you know. Hundreds of them, literally, and her life basically revolved around the church and it always created a lot of friction with the other Greek ladies in the community because Helen always put herself forward as the authority on how things should be done and how, how services should be conducted and when, what was proper and what was not. When my brother and I, you know, we spent most of our time trying to subvert everything//

I: <laughing>

L: //that, that she tried to accomplish for us. But the other Greek kids that were altar boys with us, Bobby Charabis {042} and, and umm Paul Grievas {042} and all that, they, they were the ones that were the good students. They were the ones that towed the line, they were the ones that listened to their mothers, you know. Whereas I would always pretend to listen to my mother pretty much do whatever I wanted to do but because we worked so early, you know, we started working with our paper jobs. I got my first newspaper corner when I was in 4th grade.

I: Wow, that is early.

L: Yeah. So I was in 4th grade and, and uhh it was an afternoon paper, it was the Great Falls Meter. And the first corner I had was Montana Bank and I would stay, I would get 20 newspapers, I would pay, I'd get two of 'em for a nickel and sell 'em for a nickel a piece.

I: Mmhmm.

L: And, and there were, there were 50 corners, so there were 50 kids. Then we'd get out of school at 3 o'clock or 3:30, we had to be there by 4 o'clock and we'd get our newspapers and we would stand on our corners and we would sell the afternoon papers.

I: Mmm.

L: And uhh so I had Montana Bank, my friend Rod Gordon who is my oldest friend in America who I met on 3rd Street in Great Falls and who, who lives up front {053} today. I've known him all my life.

I: In Union Square, in//

L: //upstairs, next door.

I: Oh, yes! Oh!

L: So I've known him my entire life, he was raised by his grandfather down the block from me and uhh and he had the corner across the street. My brother had another corner but what would happen is you'd get your initial 20 papers and you would sell your papers in the afternoon and they had these two guys riding around on bicycles and they would, if you needed more papers they would supply you.

I: Ohh.

L: And then your bosses, Jim and Jim, there were these two older guys named Jim and Jim would block the town and check on the paper boys to see if they were selling their papers correctly and all that. Ok so that job was my first job where I really had to, to uhh pay attention, you know. I had to, you know, I'd get out of school at 3:30, I had to be at by 4 o'clock I had to be at the newspaper place and you would line up in order of what your corner was. And your corners were ranked how many papers you sold. So the best corner was the post office. And uhh so they sold 40 papers and then it, it went down sequentially, you know and I, I think I was a 15 paper or a 20 paper kid at that time. And then if you did particularly well, if you sold out your quota and you got others they would move you up when another corner became available. So I went from number 20 something in my second corner was uhh on Skid Row, it was called the Spot Bar.

I: <laughing>

L: And it was kinda neat because it had uhh, it had a Greek café on there, the OK Café. Uhh and it had six bars on my corner. So I used to, I used to and then I had//

I: //Was the café like a

L: //Just as a, it's like a//

I: //, a Greek taver-, taverna?//

L: //No, no, no//

I: //no, oh, was that//

L: //No, no, Greeks who cooked American food.

I: Ok.

L: There were no actual cafes with Greek cuisine at all in Great Falls. You know there are 60,000 people so uhh Great Falls in the 50's and 60's, you know, I mean. If you is, was, you know it was a working class town. They had two big employers in town. One of them was Anaconda Copper Mining Company (ACM) which was across the river at a place called Black Eagle which was named by Lewis and Clark at the Great Falls in the Missouri. The reason Great Falls is called Great Falls is because Lewis and Clark had to {072} their boats around this falls in 1804 or something like that. There's a big museum there now. And Anaconda Copper built a big, wire mill there and a, and a uhh, and a big refining plant there. I believe in the 20's because the richest hill on earth as far as copper and silver was Butte, Montana which was 200 miles away. And the reason the refinery and the smelter was built in Great Falls is because the new process of electrolytic reduction needed a lot of electricity so they built a dam, they built a dam first then they built a plant there because they needed all that electrical power to, to uhh refine the copper. And then, and Anaconda Copper at that time, the 20's, 30's, and 40's supplied 60% of all the refined copper in the world. So there was Anaconda copper which employed maybe 5,000 people. Well if you extrapolate that number out to the families affected in town it's a, it's a huge number. So 4,500-5,000 men worked at, at umm at Anaconda Copper, that means like one in four or one in three families were dependent upon that smelter there. Now it declined during the 60's and the 70's because of, of more automation but they had the biggest smokestack in the world there in Great Falls. It was 500 and some feet high and, and they had a dam but Anaconda Copper was the big employer, then the Great Northern//

I: //Mmhmm//

L: //was a, was another employer, you know, cuz they had to maintain the tracks and all that sort of thing. And then there was Malmstrom Air Force Base there. So and then the strategic missile wing, the, the minuteman system, you know//

I: //Right//

L: //going over the {088} to Russia and all that was built in the middle 60's when I was in high school. So and then it was a banking and an agricultural center. They had flour mills and things like that. But it was basically kind of a blue collar kind of town. And now Malmstrom is still there but it's greatly reduced. Anaconda Copper is gone. But during the 70's it was cheaper to, to mine the copper in Butte, they had this big open pen {092} mine and they've since stopped and she, and transport the concentrate, you know. They would concentrate it and transport it. They used to transport it by rail to Great Falls to refine it but it was cheaper to send it all the way to the Orient and bring it back than it was to refine it in Great Falls. But during my time when I was growing up many, many of my friends' parents or their at least their father worked on the, at the smelter. So, so you have all this activity going around so you, you have a, you have a town that's dominated by this, these two companies. And uhh the railroad and Anaconda Copper and then you have this, this air base out there. And there were two black families in town//

I: //Ohh were there//

L: //that was a little, you know, I mean you'd think it was strange for the Greek kids, what about the black kids, you know?

I: Mmhmm.

L: But it was uhh, you know, my education, I, I guess I really kind of gained my education by working more than paying attention to what was going on in school because going to school in shifts, particularly high school, you know. You start your sophomore year uhh the, you know, the, all the workers that came up to built the, all the missile {104} and all that. The population of school age kids doubled so you were either going to school from 6AM to 12 or you were going to school from 12:30 to something like 4:30 or 5:00. I, I remember the principal of the high school coming to our junior high which, my junior high was Paris Gibson Junior High. Paris Gibson was the founder of Great Falls. They thought Great Falls was gonna be the next Minneapolis because they had water power there because the Falls was there. So I remember them saying, "You're gonna get your four solids and you're gonna get the same education, blah, blah, blah." Of course we didn't, you know, because by that time they were tracking you through school. You know, they'd look at your record and they'd say, "Well Leon likes to work with hands let's put him in shop class. He doesn't read too well because he's not payin' attention let's put him in bonehead English." So during my high school career I never read Shakespeare {112}. You know?

I: Mmhmm.

L: And I was always kinda channeled around they, they had made decisions about me.

I: Right.

L: You know that//

I: <interrupting> {113}

L: You know, I'm never gonna be a scholar, you know. I'm not like the other kids so they just kinda pushed me around just to get me out. But thank God though the land grant system because uhh when I applied, I graduated in '66 and yet {115} was starting to get hot. I applied to art school because I had taken a few art classes later on in high school and I enjoyed them. And uhh so I applied to the school of art at Montana State College in Bozeman, it later became MSU, Montana State University. And I remember when I was accepted I got a letter back from the director of the art school. A personal letter with a signature saying, you know, "You're coming to Bozeman to go to art school, great, let me introduce myself, this is what we have, we're happy to have you." And that's how that started but it was, you know, high sch-, you know, growing, Montana is a strange place. It's, it's strange because they're, they're terribly intolerant of anything that is not of the cowboy culture.

I: Mmhmm.

L: You know, uhh, very, very strange kind of place.

I: How did that effect you uhh, uhh do you think that that's part of uhh//

L: //My world view, how did that affect me?

I: Yes {125}//

L: //Well my, my, my experience is kind of strange because when, when I came home and walked across that threshold I was in a Greek household {127} expect to behave a particular sort of way. And for a long time when I would bring friends home uhh I would be a little bit embarrassed by my parents because they were so different and they didn't speak English and we ate different things.

I: Mmm.

L: You know, we ate eggplants, we had moussaka, and we ate this and we ate that and people just weren't ready for it, you know. But uhh the other thing that was a big part of my education is because my mother worked at the Rainbow Hotel which was a part of Western International Hotels, which is a big chain now, it was the best hotel in town. And very early on, I think 7th and 8th grade when I started working in the dining room at night it was the best restaurant in town and, and it would, it was the hotel that had all the society functions. And they'd have big banquets and champagne balls and charity balls and things like that. So I would start working at night as a busboy and I would wear a little red Eisenhower jacket <interviewer chuckling> {136} and then a {136} stuff and, and the Maitre d' was this guy who had trained at Cordon Bleu, Sven

Reinholdt {137}, this guy. And he taught us to uhh, you know, to serve, I mean someone would come in and we would take them water and their starters and we would work with the waitresses. And the waitresses kind of took me under their wings. And, and what our, where I really learned I think to talk to people and to watch what was going on and, and I had, at that time, you know, they'd watch you. If you were a good prospect for going to hotel management school or something like that when you were in high school they would say, you know, "What about the university here, you know, we'll do this, we'll do that. You're really a hotel guy, you know." And many of the Greeks of course, the old story is when you get two Greeks together they open a restaurant//

I: //Mmhmm//

L: //you know because I, I think the reason that they, they want, they really fell into that because the Greeks that came to America had experienced such horrendous poverty during the Civil War and the famines that they all, they wanted to get into business that were cash businesses and that could take care of their families. So they opened up these little coffee shops like Barbagianni had a coffee shop in Shelby so that they could at least feed their families. So I would be working at this hotel where the elite of the town would meet.

I: Sounds like it was quite an education.

L: Yeah, yeah, yeah it was. Like the mayor would be there or Senator Mansfield, you know, Senator Mansfield, big gun, you know. His mother lived up the street. I would pass her house every day on the way to school and when President Kennedy came, before he was shot in '63, he came and addressed Great Falls High School because, largely because Mike Mansfield would at that time, I think he was the majority leader of the Senate because Lyndon Johnson preceded him and he was now Vice President. So Mike Mansfield was the majority leader of the Senate but many times I remember that the governor, you see, Great Falls also held the state fair which was a big deal, you know, every August. So then we'd have these huge conventions where, where, and, and I would, and I would be working there and I would be taking Duke Ellington would come and play or the Ink Spots would come and play and I could take up their room service and there would be Duke Ellington there.

I: Gee wiz.

L: You know? I mean it was a big deal so <interviewer interrupting> Great Falls, yeah <laughing> yeah//

I: //<laughing>//

L: //it was, it was like the, I mean if you're gonna have a job when you're 13, 14, 15 years old the thing to do is to work at the best hotel in town.

I: Yeah.

L: And then later I started uhh making Caesar salads at the tables and cooking stroganoffs and {162} and that kind of thing. Uhh, you know, you'd, {163} you would, you would cook in front of people at the table, you serve them.

I: Mmhmm.

L: You know? So it was, it was a big part of my education. And then from there working on the railroad with my father was another, was another thing because my father, although Charlie Vellanos wanted to promote him to some work that wasn't too terribly strenuous like when you're working on a section gang, a section is a, so many miles of rail around the hub. So what we did as section workers is we went out and spiked rails and replaced ties and made repairs when there would be derailments. My first job when I was 16 or 17, the first summer that I worked, what, what happens, I'm sure that you've seen a railroad that, that the line isn't straight, there's a bunch of dips and things when you look at it//

I: //Mmhmm//

L: //it goes over the prairie. Well the way you correct that is you take these jacks out and you jack it up and you tap gravel underneath it//

I: //Wow//

L: //well my job, the first day on my job is we would go out to a section of track that needed to be repaired and you would have these jacked that weighed about 30 pounds each. They were made out of aluminum and you would jack up progressively a section of track, you know, a section of rail was 33 feet long so you would have a sight line and you would jack the track up to that rail and make it level again.

I: Mmhmm.

L: And I used to run with a jack in each hand from the back of the rail to the front. So we would progressively go up and, and work this track. Now the important thing about that is it was a plum job because the busboy job paid like something like $1.20 an hour plus tips.

I: Mmhmm.

L: You get tips and make, you know, make two or three bucks a night tips from the waitresses that would help us. But the railroad job was something like $4.50 or $5.20 an hour.

I: Ohh.

L: Which was big money//

I: //Yes//

L: //in 1962 or ’63. It was four times what you were making before.

I: Mmhmm.

L: And many times I think the first summer that I would, I would work on the railroad during the door and I would still be a busboy at night.

I: Mmm.

L: And then I would, I would, Barbagianni at one point said, “If you save your money I will match it when you go to college.”

I: Wow.

L: You know so, so he did that but I, you know, I, of course I was trying to spend my money on, on cars and girls and//

I: //Right <laughing>//

L: //whatever, whatever I could but, but the real education I think occurred for me when I was working at the Hotel Rainbow because my teachers would come in for dinner, especially the younger teachers that go out on dates and I would be serving them their Caesar salad <interviewer laughing> or whatever there is. But and then there would be these big banquets where the governor would speak//

I: //Mmm//

L: //or the Senators would come in or Duke Ellington would play umm the bass or something and I would take him up his room service or something like that. I remember when Hubert Humphrey came through, we were given all these little, you give a little tag on your car which allows you to go into the banquet room//

I: //Uh huh//

L: //you know, so, then, and, and, you know, and the//

I: //and they had to have//

L: //secret service guys were all over the place but, but I was a likable kid and, and I got along well with everybody so that, that’s where I think my primary education occurred.

I: Uh huh. It sounds like//

L: //Yeah, yeah, it was, it was interesting//

I: //and the diverse education in working in the railroad//

L: //Yeah, so my, my school career didn't really make much sense to me because my parents didn't really understand what it was all about, you know. You had to take an SAT or you had to do this but by that time I was already trapped.

I: Mmhmm.

L: They had determined that I was gonna amount to anything. And uhh//

I: //<interrupting>//

L: //Yeah, yeah, because I wasn't, you know, I wasn't paying attention, you know. I mean I worked til 11 at night and I'd be in school at 6 the next morning.

I: But you did complete//

L: //I did well, I did well because I, I uhh, I have this great memory where I can remember. So if I pay attention in class I don't have to do a lot of homework.

I: Mmhmm.

L: And then when I went to college I, I just found my transcripts that my, my parents kept so I look-, I was looking at my grades, you know. So my departmental average, you know, I mean I was like three seven five, you know, in the art school. But because//

I: //<interrupting>//

L: //it was a university you had to take, yeah physical geography and//

I: //Mmhmm//

L: //all this other sort of stuff so I, I don't, I was not an academic superstar but I graduated in four years, I graduated on time and as far as the art school goes I was, you know, the top of my class. I, I started my ceramics, I studied ceramics. In my senior year I got a NEA Grant and then uhh after I graduated I went to Haystack Mountain School back east, I was a real star as far as ceramics goes. I had the cover of a national magazine with my work on it, you know//

I: //Ohh//

L: //with ceramics {211}.

I: And//

L: //and//

I: //you, you did get a grant to go to further//

L: //I was gonna go to graduate school at Cal and study with Peter but when I came to California we sorta//

I: //With Peter//

L: //Peter Bolkas {213}

I: Ok.

L: //The, the great Peter Bolkas, my best mentor and teacher I ever had really, you know, twisted my brain in a peculiar way. M, Montana is such an odd place because uhh. For example, I'll give you an example, capital of Montana is in Helena.

I: Mmhmm.

L: Helena, Montana, the way the capital came to Helena is an interesting story. There was, the, silver was discovered in Butte, in something like 1864, something like that. But at the silver played out but it turned out to be the biggest copper strike in history. So there were these two guys, a guy named Clark and a guy named Daly, who became the copper kings.

I: Mmm.

L: And between 1865 and 1885 they took out two billion dollars in value, two billion dollars in 1885 dollars.

I: This is {224}//

L: Staggering, a staggering number and there were 300,000 people in Butte, you know. So the first thing that happened, I think the first case of documented corruption in the United States Senate was that Clark and Daly they wanted the capital to be in Butte. So money would fly over the {227}.

I: Uh huh.

L: You know? And someone got caught, I think Clark was a Senator at the time. So they got busted for corruption but anyway the capital was finally built in Helena. Daly was the guy who's an Irish guy who was a miner who, who uhh, the cancer tried to get in//

I: <laughing>

L: Who uhh would drink hard, he was an Irish miner who would drink hard with these men. He'd go down in the mines and he would, he would uhh, he was a favorite, he was considered a miner but he became a very wealthy man but he didn't divorce himself from his workers. Clark started out as a merchant and got control of the copper company but would never fraternize with his workers or his men. There's an interesting book called "War of the Copper Kings" which documents this history.

I: Mmhmm.

L: But there was this big battle of where the capital should be. Ok, the capital in Montana ends up in Helena. Now there was a governor named Poindexter at some point or a senator named Poindexter who happened to be a collector of modern art. So there's this collection in Montana called the "Poindexter Collection" which came to the people of Montana through this governor or senator or whatever he was.

I: Mmhmm.

L: And they have Picasso's and they have, they have {241} and they have this tremendous collection of modern art, very valuable collection which they don't display. But what they do display is they, they built a new building for Model T Ford Museum. So you have all this, you have all this art//

I: //The art actually belongs to the city//

L: //to the, to the people, to the state. But they won't build a gallery for it. I mean the other big thing in Great Falls, the other, I, I think the other thing that got me interested in art is it's the hometown of Charlie Russell, the great Charlie Russell, the western artist. There are two seminal figures. There's Frederick Remington, there's Charlie Russell. And Charlie grew up in Great Falls and one of my paper corners I used to go down to the Mint Bar where Charlie used to hang out. And you see pictures of him there//

I: //Whoa//

L: //they have this collection of stuff so, so they have the Charlie Russell Museum and every year they have this big western art auction which is very big, it's the biggest thing in the United States.

I: So his, his art//

L: //Still in Great Falls//

I: //is displayed there.

L: Everywhere, yeah. But, but the Poindexter Collection, as far as I know, is still under the staircase and the state museum. But they just don't see themselves, you know, I was, when I was a sophomore at Montana State or when I was a freshman I was, I was uhh a bunch of cowboys, you know. It's a, it's a big ag school so a bunch of <coughing> you know, when you show up at Montana State//

I: //Where is Montana State?

L: It's in Bozeman. Bozeman, Montana//

I: //Which is how far from Great Falls//

L: //which is north of, it's about 200 miles from Great Falls, it's in the southeast corner of the state, it's right, it's 90 miles from Yellowstone Park.

I: Ohh.

L: It's in the Gallatin Valley. And it's a big ag school.

I: Mmhmm.

L: And, you know, they have like a rodeo team which is always up there.

I: Uh huh.

L: But I mean kids would show up with, with horse trailers and {262} and all that stuff. And, and they had armories. At that time when I went there they had an armory on the floor {263} you know, cuz during hunting seasons everyone hunts. So you bring your weapons to school, you know. And you would have this armory on the floor. But the, those of us who went to the art school were kind of like a, a real minority. We were kinda discriminated against, I had a beard like this when I was a freshman and a bunch of guys jumped me in my room trying to cut my hair cuz it was long hair. You know, this is 1966 when the hippies, '67. But it's, it's Montana for the Montanans, you know. I mean even today when Montana makes the news, why does it make the news? Well there's a, there's a patriotic militia up there//

I: //Mmhmm//

L: //that they're sorta kinda stand off {270}, they're, you know, they're some kind of something or other. So they pride themselves on being these rugged individualists who fenced off the entire state, they want to keep everyone else out, they wanna bear, they want, they don't wanna pay taxes, they wanna shoot everything that moves, they wanna poach brown bears. And it's just, it's just not something that interests me. I, I, I found out very early, when you study art, when you study the great art through history, I mean, I was lucky to have gone to Montana State. I was lucky to have {275} Conrad who was the director at the time and who later taught me art history. I was, I was lucky to have

dedicated teachers that really opened up my mind and horizons because uhh Montana is kinda, it's kind of a dead end unless you have someone//

I: //So you wouldn't fit there today, you don't think//

L: //No, I have friends that I've graduated who have done very well there. But, but it doesn't have any of the things that I'm interested in.

I: Mmhmm.

L: You know. But it was good, it was good for the family. It was good for the Greeks that were there because it was a small town, it was a small community. They could get around, they could work with one another and uhh I don't know what I would have been had I grown up in Chicago or Boston or someplace like that. I would be totally different for sure, without question. I mean like growing up with Greeks can you imagine//

I: //<laughing>//

L: //the kind of, the kind of jealousies and all that sort of stuff that would happen. I mean it's just, it's. So that, you know, growing up in Montana was, what's all that I've known but I know that it's different because uhh when, when I left the first thing I did is I jumped in my car and I drove to Maine.

I: Maine?

L: Because I, yeah I went to Haystack Mountain School, I was//

I: //that's where, ohh that's in Maine.

L: Yeah it's in Maine, it's on Deer Island, Maine. You can't get farther away from Montana than Deer Island, Maine because you're almost up in Nova Scotia.

I: Ohh.

L: So.

I: When did you come to the Bay Area?

L: In 1973, I think. '73.

I: And what did you do when you first came here?

L: I was gonna go to graduate school at Cal.

I: Ohh.

L: But I met Peter Bolkas and we started developing real estate and that got put off so I never did go to graduate school. So my art career, I mean what I should have done according to those is that I should have gotten my master's degree in ceramics and then I'd be teaching ceramics at odd hours or something. I'd be close to retirement age now and I would uhh, who, who the hell knows? I don't know. So, so//

I: //So instead you're making this wonderful//

L: //yeah//

I: //creative room, I'm sure and//

L: //instead, I, I, I've spent the last 25 years just building my studio and making things and, and finding this little niche where I work for the wealthy, you know, building this//

I: //Could you describe your studio?

L: Well I have a studio now which is at the former naval air station in Alameda and it's in a building which uhh, building 14 which used to be the jet engine test facility. It was a building that was scheduled to be torn down but I had heard that there was cheap space there and I, I, I always had studios. The studio that I had before I went out to the air station was about 3,500 square feet. And when I heard that there was cheap space at Alameda so I went out there and I said uhh, "Show me a building that nobody else wants."

I: Hmm.

L: Because I knew they had odd buildings and I figured I could get a better deal. I had heard that they were renting space for five cents a foot.

I: Whoa, that's very reasonable//

L: //Yeah, yeah but it turned out it was something like twenty or twenty five cents a food. But we found a building, I found a building, I looked at it, I said, "This is really something. I don't know if I can swing it off." And I mentioned it to a friend of mine and he had a financial partner and he manufactured uhh {316} furnitures so I took him out there and he looked at it. The building is about 30 some thousand square feet. So we moved his business into it and then umm my studio so in my studio I have probably a total of about 5,000 square feet. And I have a complete woodshop and I have a complete metal shop and what I do now is I make sculptural furniture and I have this little specialty, this obscure specialty of, of building woodfired pizza ovens, grills, barbeque ovens, floor, restaurant tours and foodies, you know. Live fire is becoming very popular so I'm kinda like the last guy standing, this is just something that was a product of my ceramic experience working with masonry and brick. And then my brother and I had a

construction firm called, “Kyrios” {327} we’re general contractors, we’re both licensed and we started building, I built a pizza oven for a friend of mine in San Francisco, in North Beach 15 years ago and someone came in off the street and said they had a barbeque oven that had some problems, could I repair it.

I: Mmhmm.

L: That was Firehouse Barbeque on Clement Street. So I repaired that and they were happy with my work and then we’d go three restaurants, complete restaurants for them, my brother and I, then I//

I: //What year was that?

L: Uhh probably s-, 1980 something. And then I built, we built one at Larkspur Landing, one in Santa Rosa, one in Burlingame. And then in 1989 I did Big Nate’s Barbeque, uhh, {336} the basketball player//

I: //yeah//

L: //I built a special one for him and then uhh Rose Pistola, {337} black cat, Terrell {338}, I have, I have these fruity clients. You know they find out about me, I don’t advertise. I’m kind of in the grey economy//

I: //Uh huh//

L: //I’m just kinda here but when you go to arts school you’re not prepared for any kind of reality and there’s no job description so I do what I call walking the razor. So one of the things that I do when it, when it comes up is I build these wood fire things. When we had the construction firm, when we built, I built a l-, lot at first one, you know, this bakery.

I: Mmhmm.

L: I did a lot of uhh woodwork, did casework. So I started from ceramics, I went to woodwork and cabinetmaking and from there I went into woodfire stuff and then I started metalfabrication because I had to fabricate metal uhh as well and when I worked with Peter Bolkas I learned about bronzecasting and ceramics and so on. So every little bit of obscure knowledge I had, I was able to kinda rule that over into something else and expand it. So now I, I do this uhh, I do these many different things.

I: Where can people see your work?

L: Well I haven’t, in the last couple years I’ve been involved with building and installation for a computer mogul so I haven’t had a lot of time to work in my studio.

I: Mmhmm.

L: But I have, I have uhh, I have dealers and I have agents and I do commissions but I haven't been able to work regularly so I have an inventory of work//

I: //Mmhmm//

L: //that I can show. I have a gallery in, in uhh, in uhh Sacramento,

I: Wow.

L: And I have, I have uhh {358} Tracera Gallery there was one in Palo Alto and one in San Francisco. I have a number of, of galleries that would handle my stuff if I could just settle down and make it.

I: Mmhmm.

L: But it's always an economic crunch, you know. I mean my, my studio, my nut every month is about three or four grand, you know. My studio cost me just to keep the doors open//

I: //Mmhmm, right.

L: So I and, and I work pretty much alone, or I have, I have two or three assistants as time goes on. But I'm kind of connected to the art community and I frequently get, I get calls from references from people. For example, someone'll call up and say, "Gee I need a zinc countertop," well turns out that Christopher, he used to work with me 15 years ago, is like the zinc king. And then I have guys who are metal fabricators. I know guys who are stair builders. And I, the kind of tooling that I require, I'm a tool chum//

I: //Mmhmm//

L: //You know, I have many, many different kinds of tools but I have a couple of tools that are peculiar because of their capacity and what they can do. So if there's something oddball that nobody else could do it usually ends up with me.

I: Mmhmm.

L: And then I, then I do it so. I've been self-employed, I graduated from college in 1978. And from there I've been pretty much self-employed ever since. I've never been qualified, I tried to get an assembly line job once when I lost my grant, I was at the University of Delaware teaching in an extension program. And I lost my teaching grant so I went to General Motors to try to get a production line job and put down my qualifications, my obscure knowledge about art and this and that and, and I couldn't get a job to save my life.

I: Mmm.

L: So I just started working//

I: //Dare I ask you, uhh what is your brother doing now, is he still working in the art uhh//

L: //my, my brother is a, no, my brother's a real estate {382}

I: Ohh.

L: He values money more than I do so he has, he has a number of apartment buildings in Berkeley here and there.

I: Oh so he's in this area.

L: Yeah, he lives in Orinda. I haven't seen him for a number of years, we just aren't//

I: //Ohh and your sister?

L: My sister is a high-risk Obstetrics nurse in Chicago.

I: Chicago.

L: Yeah, she.

I: Does she have//

L: //she has the dist-, the peculiar distinction of, she's very outspoken.

I: <laughing>

L: She has no subtlety so she's been fired probably more than anyone in history, you know? Every time I call her to say, "How you doin'?" she's, "Ohh I just got fired from another job." And my father used to say to me, he says, "You know, your sister's got balls but she doesn't have any honey on {391}."

I: Oh gosh <laughing>

L: You know? So she's, she's constantly, what she should really be doing is to be a patient advocate.

I: Uh huh.

L: Because she's worked in every hospital, you know. Now that she's worked in, you know, she worked at Cook County for years and she, and, and so what she, and she's so outspoken because, cuz she's on the side of the patients//

I: //Mmhmm//

L: //that she constantly gets fired. So she's probably been fired 50 times in the last 20 years. But I keep telling her, you know, " You need to be a patient advocate, they need people like you//

I: //exactly//

L: //who knows the system inside and out who can advocate for, for, for patients.

I: Is she active in the Greek community there?

L: Not much. None of us are really active in the Greek community because our, our experience had, has been. I mean when I was growing up, you know, we'd have a church council and there would be a big fight, who's gonna be president, who's gonna be this, who's gonna be that, you know? Greeks are, are kind of strange. We kind of circle the wagons when they were being attacked but they fight amongst themselves constantly. So I'm, I'm not, I don't really, I have a saying that, "If you're gonna be with Greeks be with less than 10 because if you get more than 10 Greeks together their collective mentality collapses and they start fighting." So I don't, I don't know many Greeks, of course, I know Leonidas and Hercules and a few others but I don't, I'm not a member. I had to join the Greek Church when I baptized my niece//

I: //Ohh//

L: //my mother went through this whole routine, she called me up, you know, she needs a gold cross, she needs this, she needs that.

I: Heh.

L: I had to join the church, it ended up costing me, you know, $5,000 to baptize my niece!

I: <laughing>

L: But my mother wanted it and, and, you know, what are you gonna do? You listen to your mother, if you don't do anything else then, uhh this is universal with Greeks I believe. That when their mother, Greek mothers are strange, they're convinced that their daughters can take care of any man alive but and they're also convinced that no woman is good enough for their sons.

I: <laughing>

L: And I don't understand what that's all about.

I: And, and you did not marry a Greek woman?

L: No, no, but every time I came home there was another girl there.

I: <chuckling>

L: I didn't get married til I was 50.

I: Really?

L: Yeah, so. That's, that's the story as far as that goes.

I: That's//

L: //But not because my mother didn't try.

I: <laughing>

L: You know, cuz there was, there was always a Greek girl around.

I: But you {427}//

L: //Well they're just not, they're just not interested in art//

I: //<interrupting>

L: You know, they're, they're, and they don't have, they don't have lives of their own. They're groomed to be wives and mother which is perfect but that's.

I: Well I'd like to find out more about the documents that you've uncovered recently.

L: I umm, upon the death of my mother in 1998 my father died in 1993 and in 1990 when he was in his 80's, his early 80's I actually insisted that we go back to Greece uhh with him so I could see my father in his own environment. And in the year 1990 I was able to make oral histories of all the living members of my father's generation, at that time, then my mother's. So I have about fifteen hours of videotape and audiotape of all the living members of my family. I have, I'm kind of the de facto family historian because when, when we left Greece uhh we, when we came to America we were the only members of our family to come here. We did sponsor, my parents did sponsor other members of the family in 1972 but from 1951 to 1972 and by 1972 I had left the nuclear family and I was on my own. Uhh I grew up in Montana without cousins, without uncles, without grandparents, without any kind of extended family so I had no real knowledge

about how Greeks interacted with one another or how families worked until I went back with my father and it was such a great pleasure to be with my father for eight weeks. So I was able to observe him and see what kind of man he was and listen, and listen to the stories of people who worked for my family, you know, like field hands who worked for our family for 20 years or people who had known my father when he was a young man or people who during the course of the war, you know, World War II we're talking about and then the Civil War who had helped one another or who had known my, my parents. So//

I: //I'd like to get more into that but we are running out of tape//

L: //Ok.

I: Maybe with another tape.

L: Yeah, sure.

I: Uhh but could you describe some of the documents?// {467}

L: I have, yeah, in, in 1998 I have actually found some of the uhh immigration documents coming to America and the steamship tickets and official translations of our birth certificates and uhh Greek passports uhh {471} of support from our sponsor. So I have all these documents and photographs uhh that relate to our family and our journey to America and I'm just kind of cataloguing along for my nieces and nephews or my children, should I have any at some point. But I think it's important to keep these documents and they should become of some archive somewhere.

I: So you would be willing to give//

L: //Sure, sure//

I: //and, and I//

L: //Sure//

I: I understand that uhh we will be able to, to get some of these//

L: //Sure//

I: //in the {480} library.

L: Sure, whatever is, you know, of use to the greater community because it's not, it's not only my story it's the story of so many people and so many different ethnic groups. I am quite sure that every ethnicity has an immigration story, has this same kinda stuff but I was lucky to have stumbled on these documents actually.

I: Mmm.

L: And umm, what I'd like to do is and I have letters and, and diaries and things which I can't read so I'm, I'm going to learn to read Greek so I can actually understand what kind of torments my parents went through, you know? They left Greece when they were 44 years old, I was, my mother was 40 when I was born. So to leave a country like that when you're 40 years old to come to America//

I: //<interrupting>//

L: //yeah//

I: //or more//

L: //to come to America with three small children to Montana, it was lucky we probably went there but it, I mean it's, it's a dramatic thing. So I'm kind of reconstructing all this stuff. The other, my other siblings, you know, have different memories but they, they were not present when I, I, you know, got all these materials and they know that I have them but they're not terribly interested in them. So I'm kind of the family archivist so I'm just keeping these documents, you know, the, they're historical documents and they're//

I: //They are//

L: //they're important to the great community I think because it, it tells a story kind of on the sidelines of the, of the American, Greek American experience on the edge there. So anyway//

I: //what things?//

L: //these things are available.

I: Thank you and I, we will do another tape.

L: Sure.

END OF SIDE B {510}

END OF INTERVIEW